

St Thérèse and the Contemplative Heart of the Intellectual Life

A Sermon Preached at the Katholische Hochschule ITI on the Feast of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face, Trumau, October 1st, 2022

Yesterday we already anticipated the Feast of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face. And today we celebrate again fittingly giving our patroness a double Feast. From the very beginning of the ITI, her holy countenance has watched over us with generous and benevolent love.

When the ITI was first planted, like a delicate seedling,¹ it more than once seemed that it would wither and fail. On each occasion, the intercession of St Thérèse saved us. For example, one occasion, when the ITI was about to be closed for lack of funds. The president was in America, making a last-ditch effort to find enough donations to keep the Institute going. The students prayed a novena to St Thérèse. And then, quite unexpectedly, help came from St Thérèse's own country, from France, from Monsieur Michelin, the pious industrialist— a generous gift that kept the ITI in existence.

The patronage of St Thérèse, a cloistered, contemplative nun, has always been a sign and guarantee of the founding vision of the ITI that sees contemplation as the heart and center of the intellectual life. The ITI was originally founded in the remote Charter House of Gaming, where the Carthusian monks once devoted their life to contemplation, and now it is situated in a Schloss belonging to another place of contemplation: my own Cistercian Abbey of Heiligenkreuz.

Everything that we do at the ITI is ordered to contemplation. Learning and study are ordered to knowing and understanding, to gazing in humble joy at Him who is Truth itself.

Even the great pagan philosophers knew this. The discourse of reason, the laborious path of dialectic and logic, is ordered to emerging from the shadows and images of the sensible world to gaze on the imperishable light of the first Truth. As Plotinus put it,

That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being. If anyone sees it, what passion will he feel, what longing in his desire to be united with it, what a shock of delight!²

And yet, the pagan philosophers were aware that this knowledge was too high for humankind:

¹ Cf. John Paul II, Homily, Sankt Pölten, June 20th, 1998: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19980620_st-polten.html (accessed October 1st, 2022).

² Plotinus, *Enneads* I.VI ("On Beauty"), ch. 7, lines 14-16; trans. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

But how shall we find the way? [says Plotinus] What method can we devise? How can one see the “inconceivable beauty” which stays within the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it?³

In Christ, a new way of contemplation is opened to us. The inconceivable beauty comes out of the sanctuary and descends to us taking on our lowly nature, in order to elevate us to participation in His life.

When St Thérèse was six or seven years old, she saw the sea for the first time.

The sight made a deep impression on me [she writes] I could not take my eyes off it. Its majesty, and the roar of the waves, all spoke to my soul of the greatness and power of God.⁴

The loving contemplation of God Himself, the true infinite of greatness and power and beauty and goodness, that was to be her vocation.

That evening at the hour when the sun seems to sink into the vast ocean, [she writes] leaving behind it a trail of glory, I sat with Pauline on a bare rock, and gazed for long on this golden furrow which she told me was an image of grace illumining the way of faithful souls here below. Then I pictured my soul as a tiny boat, with a graceful white sail, in the midst of the furrow, and I resolved never to let it withdraw from the sight of Jesus, so that it might sail peacefully and quickly towards the Heavenly Shore.⁵

The way of contemplation, the swift boat which would take her into the Divine Presence, was Jesus Christ, God made man. In Jesus she received the hope, the means and the promise, of a greater union with God than is conceivable to unaided human reason.

On receiving her First Communion Thérèse wrote:

How sweet was the first embrace of Jesus! It was indeed an embrace of love. I felt that I was loved, and I said: ‘I love Thee, and I give myself to Thee for ever.’ ... He and little Thérèse had known and understood one another. That day our meeting was more than simple recognition, it was perfect union. We were no longer two. Thérèse had disappeared like a drop of water lost in the immensity of the ocean; Jesus alone remained... And then my joy became so intense, so deep, that it could not be restrained; tears of happiness welled up and overflowed.⁶

St Thomas teaches us that there are two kinds of wisdom in which we contemplate God. One is the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue, acquired through the inquiry of reason. The other kind of wisdom is a Gift of the Holy Spirit, who gives us an understanding of God through “suffering of divine things,” a sympathy and connaturality with God that is given through infused love.⁷

³ *Enneads* I.VI, ch. 8, lines 1-4.

⁴ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, trans. Thomas N. Taylor (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p. 45.

⁵ *The Story of a Soul*, p. 45.

⁶ *The Story of a Soul*, p. 59.

⁷ See: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, IIa-IIae, Q. 45, A. 2.

This wisdom and science through connaturality, through suffering the passion of divine love, is what St Thérèse had. As she writes:

Our Lord has no need of books or teachers to instruct our souls. He, the Teacher of Teachers, instructs us without any noise of words. I have never heard Him speak, yet I know He is within me. He is there, always guiding and inspiring me; and just when I need them, lights, hitherto unseen, break in... Sometimes... at the close of a meditation spent in utter dryness, a word of comfort is given to me: 'Here is the Teacher I give thee, He will teach thee all that thou shouldst do. I wish thee to read in the Book of Life in which is contained the science of love...' The Science of Love! How sweetly do these words echo in my soul! That science alone do I desire. Having given all my substance for it.⁸

The two kinds of wisdom—that which comes from intellectual inquiry, and that which comes from suffering divine love—ought to be joined in Catholic intellectual life. The ITI is devoted to contemplation of the truth through both kinds of wisdom. This devotion is fittingly exemplified in our patrons— St Zdislava of Lemberk, the holy matron, who shows that marriage and family are a particular vivid sign of the union with God that is the essence of both kinds of wisdom; St Thomas of Aquino, preëminent among all doctors in the discourse of reason, the careful arguments and distinctions through which faith seeks understanding; and finally St Thérèse, master of connatural knowledge of Divine love.

From its beginning, the ITI has been a community devoted to prayer, to union with God through the Sacraments of the Church, to becoming connatural with God through worshipping Him in the Liturgies of the Church both East and West, and learning to love Him in our neighbors, in the fraternal charity of a common life.

This connatural knowledge is the foundation and support of the wisdom that we seek through the discourse of reason, the arduous path of grammar, and dialectic, and logic, which at times seems to have little to do with our goal, and yet is always ordered to the contemplation of the one who is Truth.

When setting out to sea in a boat, a person does not always keep its majestic vista in view. Perhaps, he is an oarsman, and sees only the back of the oarsman in front of him. Let us not forget, when our intellectual voyage is arduous, that we are setting out for one whose greatness and beauty far surpass the greatness and beauty of the ocean.

Our desire is to contemplate God. To see the one Whom we love—that sharp beauty, Who pierces our heart with a pain that is joy; that blazing love; and terrible, shining justice; and sweet, tender mercy. It is God, God alone whom we seek. It is for God alone that we live, and move, and study, and eat and sleep, and pray and stretch out our hearts and minds in unbearable desire and thirst: *Sicut cervus ad fontes*:

As a deer yearns for streams of water,
so I yearn for You, O God.

⁸ *The Story of a Soul*, p. 117.

My whole being thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and see
the presence of God?...
My God, my being is bent for my plight.
Therefore do I recall You from Jordan land,
from the Hermons and Mount Mizar.
Deep unto deep calls out... (Psalm 42:1-2,6-7)

The deep of our unbearable desire calls out to infinite depths of mercy and goodness, the abyss of love, who is the abyss of Truth.

Dear St Thérèse help us to always desire and yearn and thirst for God. And help us to remain His Word, who is our Way and our Truth and our Life. As you yourself wrote:

We know, then, what is this word which must be kept; we cannot say, like Pilate: 'What is truth?' We possess the Truth, for our Beloved dwells in our hearts.⁹

Amen.

⁹ *The Story of a Soul*, p. 242.